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ABSTRACT

Santeria is a religion which originated in West Africa and evolved from the syncretism of the culture of the Yoruba people with Catholicism in Cuba. Juanita, who was born in Puerto Rico and taught herself how to read and write, owns a "botanica," a retail shop specializing in Santeria paraphernalia. Juanita is a santera (priestess) in her religion; her knowledge of Santeria was taught to her via an initiation system. Although Juanita has had little formal schooling, she has been able to maintain and operate a successful business for more than 20 years. In her work and in her dual role as santera and businesswoman, Juanita uses strategies such as experimentation, observation, reading, memorization, and research. Business is transacted at the botanica in both Spanish and English; Yoruba is used only for ceremonial purposes. The oral nature of this environment is exemplified by Juanita's almost exclusive reliance on advertising via word of mouth or the radio. Beneath this veneer of orality, however, is a rich bilingual print environment. Even Juanita's oral performances (a form of story-telling connected with the act of divination) are based on the literate behaviors of research, reading, and memorization. (RS)

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Literacy as Magic: The Role of Oral and Written Texts in the Santeria Religious Community.

Introduction

Santeria is a religion which originated in West Africa, in the country now known as Nigeria. It evolved from the culture of the Yoruba people, whose religious beliefs included relationships with the spiritual beings they called the "orishas" (Murphy 8). Divination provided the key to the interpretation of the messages of the orishas, and the messages, according to Bascom, could include any of the following: "myths, folktales, praise names, incantations, songs, proverbs, and even riddles." The oral tradition of the Yoruba provided "unwritten scriptures," whose literary merit was "secondary to their religious significance" (11). The spirituality of the Yoruba was manifested in their religion and artistry, but they were also successful in the field of commerce.

By the seventeenth century, the Yorubas controlled the trade routes of West Africa (Murphy 7). The nineteenth century brought European traders to the cities of the Yoruba, and with them came the advent of "the wheel, the lever, the inclined plane, and the written word" (Prince 85). The Europeans also provided the enemies of the wealthy Yoruba kingdom a vehicle for conquest: the slave trade.

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It was primarily due to political and religious reasons that the Dahomy and Fulani tribes helped to sell the Yoruba into slavery in the early part of the nineteenth century, but it was for economic reasons (sugar) that the Spanish brought them to Cuba (Murphy 21-22).

In Cuba, the Yoruba were introduced to the Catholic religion, and they found that the Catholic saints were similar to their orishas, only "different manifestations of the same spiritual entity" (Murphy 32). Santeria, which "literally means the worship of the saints," emerged from the syncretism of the two religious systems (Gonzalez-Wippler 3). Murphy argues that unlike the United States, where Protestantism was the dominant religion, requiring a "personal conversion and biblical language," Catholicism in Cuba offered many similarities to the Yoruba religion; for example, an "emphasis on ritual, on a remote God and active petitionable intermediaries, on blessed objects and the tangible presence of the miraculous" (114). The "American occupation of the island (1898-1902)," and the Cuban Revolution of 1959" (Murphy 34-35) provided opportunities for cross-cultural communication, and forced the orishas to once again adapt to new environments, such as the United States.

Collection & Analysis

1. Background: A botanica is a "Retail shop specializing in Santeria paraphernalia, especially 'botanicals', that is herbs" (Murphy 176). Botanica Yemaya is located in the Humbolt Park neighborhood on Chicago's near north side. This area of Chicago

was first settled in the mid to late nineteenth century, and has provided a home to the following ethnic groups: Germans, Scandinavians, Russian Jews, Poles, and Italians. Since the early 1960's, Hispanics (primarily Puerto Ricans), have replaced Europeans as the dominant cultural group in the community (Fact Book 50-52, 55-66).

2. Key Actor: Juanita, the proprietress of the botanica, was born in Puerto Rico, and in order to help support her family, she had to quit school after the 2nd grade. She learned how to read and write by practicing on her own. She became involved with Santeria when she was 38 years old, and living in Chicago.

She had worked at the Zenith Corporation for fourteen years, and in 1971, she was able to use her profit-sharing money to buy a building and open her shop. Juanita did not have prior business experience; she explained to me that she learned how to do things, "as I went along." Her husband passed away in 1979, leaving her as the sole support for their three children.

Unlike most small businesses, the bottom-line is not Juanita's sole concern. Her primary role is that of "santera" (priestess) in the religion. For example, she sells books in her shop, but she feels responsible for what she sells; therefore, she or Wanda (her daughter) try to read them before they become available for sale. Another example concerns an African herb that one of her suppliers told her could be utilized to attract money. After experimenting with it, and achieving positive results on several occasions, Juanita then felt that she could

recommend it to her customers.

Juanita learned her business acumen through instinct and trial and error, but her knowledge of Santeria was taught to her via an initiation system. She explained to me that she learned about Santeria from people showing her how to do things. It is the responsibility of the santera/o who initiates an individual into the religion to act as that person's mentor. If the relationship is good between them, then the student will learn rapidly. Juanita explained, "If the ahijado (godchild) don't care to learn ... the madrina (godmother) don't go after him to learn." It is the job of the apprentice to actively seek knowledge from the master.

Juanita believes that her role as a teacher carries a great responsibility; therefore, she waited six years before she helped anyone else "make the saint," which is the initiation to become a santera/o. She now has six godchildren, and when I asked her if she would like to have more, she explained, "It's a big responsibility, and I don't think I need no headaches."

Juanita then directed me to an article in the Chicago Tribune newspaper that discussed a gentleman who had only been involved in the religion for a short while, yet in the article he bragged about having over 100 godchildren (Cross 8); he keeps in contact with them via newsletter (Cross 12). Juanita frequently says, "One must walk before one can run," in this religion, and she feels that the subject of the article has violated this adage; she believes that he does not follow the rules of the

religion, and that making money is his primary concern.

2. The Botanica Business: Based on Juanita's observations, and later verified by her daughter, the ethnic composition of the botanica's clientele is 80% Hispanic, with half of this group being Puerto Rican; the other 20% is equally divided between what Juanita labels "American blacks and whites." The large Hispanic representation reflects the ethnic composition of the neighborhoods that surround the botanica, but all customers are not necessarily from the Chicago area; people regularly visit from Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

Although Juanita operates a thriving business, she sometimes utilizes advertising. Her only printed ad appeared in the "Yellow Pages" under "Gift Shops," but she discontinued it years ago. During times when business does slow down, she places an ad on a popular, Spanish language, AM radio program.

Juanita's language of preference is Spanish. She prefers it for her record-keeping, for dealing with suppliers, as well as writing messages for her daughter. Each day however, Juanita is confronted with numerous communication situations that also require English, as well as African dialects. A revealing example of the linguistic complexity of the botanica business was a price-list of African herbs that Juanita allowed me to examine. She explained that she acquires the herbs from a company in Philadelphia, which imports them from Africa, specifically from Nigeria and Kenya. There were 35 herbs listed; the African name appeared in the first column, and to the right of it appeared the

Spanish equivalent, followed by an explanation of the herb's properties. An English translation appeared beneath the Spanish.

3. Written Materials: I asked Juanita and Wanda about the reading literacy abilities of their clientele, and though we all agreed that this was difficult to ascertain, they estimated, based solely on their observations, that 40-50% of their customers only read Spanish. They further estimated that between 10-20% could not read or write in any language. I asked if this presented a problem in regard to practicing Santeria, and Wanda explained that literacy was not a prerequisite for faith. She used the example of a Crucifix, which derives all of its meaning symbolically. I then asked if one needed to read in order to gain a better understanding of Santeria, and to this she replied, "... interest is what makes someone pick up a book. If a person is raised only by word of mouth, then that is how they wish to be taught ..."

On one of my visits to the botanica, I made an inventory of the printed materials, and I was surprised by two things; one section that appeared to be missing, and one section that was there. The section that appeared to be missing were the books written in English. There were 25 titles that were for sale in the display case, and all but three were written in Spanish. Wanda explained to me that the scarcity of books verified the fact that she can not keep them in stock.

The selection of books that surprised me by their presence,

as well as by the fact that they comprised the largest section, were the Catholic religious materials. There were 35 varieties of Novena booklets, that is prayer booklets; these particular ones were written in Spanish, and none were more than 15 pages in length.

The shelf space behind the counter and the cash register contained items such as colognes, soaps, and herbs. The packaging frequently contained instructions in English and Spanish. The floor space of the shop was filled with Catholic religious statues, as well as various colored candles. Most of the candles exhibited a written prayer, and the majority of these texts were written in both English and Spanish.

4. Divination: According to Juanita, one thing that an ahijado can learn without the help of a madrina are the various myths that are associated with the oddus. An oddu is a pattern made by the ritual throwing of 16 cowrie shells, which can form 256 possible combinations. Divination is accomplished by describing the myths that are associated with each oddu. Juanita explained, "I can do it with shells or with the cards, because I know already the oddus ... the meaning of this number, this number, and this number. Once you know the meaning of the stories, you can tell the person exactly like ... like a book."

Wanda joined in, adding, "It's similar to like Aesop's fables. Each one of his stories has a moral, ... well, the oddus are very similar to that, because all of the stories have a moral, and after a while, you get to associate these morals with

the numbers, so when a person comes to you and you do a reading ... you just like bring it up, and that way you can tell a person their life without knowing them." Scollon and Scollon would call this storytelling technique "thematic abstraction, by which skilled narrators create interactive stories. One selects out behaviors and events, characterizes them and then remembers them as units" (145). Wanda explains the process as follows: "The more you practice it, the easier it is, and the more simpler it seems to you. While other people ... not knowing how, will be amazed at how you can deduce all of this information...."

Juanita explained to me that the orihate (One who has passed through a series of intricate initiations.) orients beginners in regard to divining with the shells. She was quick to add however, "In your spare time you read." Juanita explained further, that she frequently compares what she has read with other books. Juanita revealed the reasoning behind her research when she stated, "... you have to have the spiritual power, but if you don't read ... you don't know; you are not sure what they (the orishas) tell you to do. If you have the knowledge of what's going on ... when they tell you this, you know what to do ...."

Results and Conclusions: Although Juanita has had little formal schooling, she has been able to maintain and operate a successful business for more than 20 years. In her work, Juanita utilizes strategies such as experimentation, observation, reading, memorization, and research, in her dual role as that of santera

and businesswoman. Business is transacted at the botanica in both Spanish and English; Yoruba is used only for ceremonial purposes. The oral nature of this environment is exemplified by Juanita's almost exclusive reliance on advertising via word of mouth or the radio.

If one ventures beneath this veneer of orality however, there exists a rich bilingual print environment. Even Juanita's oral performances (divination), are based on the literate behaviors of research, reading, and memorization.

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